

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Nzuri Na Mengi ('Good and Plenty'): The Caine Prize for African Literature, 2007-2017 Review Essay

Ron Singer

### Introduction

'*Nzuri Na Mengi*' is the sequel to an essay I wrote in 2007 about the first seven winners of The Caine Prize for African Writing, a prestigious annual award for short fiction.<sup>1</sup> Over the ensuing decade, much has happened to Africa, to my own relationship with the continent, and to our planet. As for the Prize, *per se*, the sequel has been a happy one. The perks of victory continue to include a cash award of 10,000 British pounds (the world's largest prize for African writing), as well as extensive publicity, which helps recipients garner book contracts and other plums.

The 2007-2017 winners have increasingly strained the elastic criteria for eligibility: 'someone who was born in Africa, or who is a national of an African country, or whose parents are African, and whose work has reflected that cultural background.'<sup>2</sup>

What with conferences, residencies, and so forth, even the three Caine Prize winners who currently live in Africa are global citizens. Since several recipients teach literature and writing across the continent and beyond, it is no surprise that they wield the trademark tools of post-modernism: shifting points-of-view, time-frames that slip in and out of focus, multiple registers, and so on. Like the first seven, many of the eleven subsequent stories address issues plucked from the headlines, such as political chicanery, the environmental crisis, and the plight of refugees. Given the condition today of both Africa and the world, it is unsurprising that the stories project a sense of growing urgency. As 2001 winner Helon Habila remarked, contemporary African writing cannot *help* being political.<sup>3</sup>

As for my own connection with the continent, in 2010-2011 I sojourned in six countries, interviewing activists for a book about the state of African democracy.<sup>4</sup> This project was a way to revisit my Peace Corps days in Nigeria during the 1960s, the first decade of Independence for many sub-Saharan nations. My 2010-2011 experiences also served as a reality check for the essay I had written in 2007, and they continue to inform '*Nzuri Na Mengi*.'

Six of the 2007-2017 Caine-Prize winning stories can be grouped thematically, three each about children at risk, and memory recaptured. The other stories' themes are wide-ranging: gay love in traditional African society, fundamentalist Christianity in the diaspora, environmental disaster; war and politics; and Sufi-ism and literature in contemporary Sudan. To provide a

<sup>1</sup> 'O Ti Lo Wa Ju (You Have Gone Past All): The Caine Prize for African Writing,' *The Georgia Review*, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The Caine Prize for African Writing: How to Enter: <http://caineprize.com/how-to-enter/>

<sup>3</sup> Frank Bures, 'Everything Follows, An Interview with Helon Habila,' *Poets & Writers*, online edition, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Ron Singer, *Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with Pro-Democracy Leaders* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press/Red Sea Press, 2015).

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sampling of the stories, *Nzuri Na Mengi* will consider three particularly noteworthy examples. At the end of the essay, readers will find a chronological list of all the stories, with annotations for the eight that have not been discussed. This list includes publication details, with URLs for downloading.

### Children at Risk.

Zimbabwean author, No Violet Bulawayo's 'Hitting Budapest' asks us to bear witness to the impoverished lives of African children. 'Hitting Budapest' evokes a shocking reaction in its readers, which is suitable to its unsettling subject. The story's complexity begins with its title and the author's pen name. 'Hitting' is a slang word for robbery. In this case, a band of six desperately poor and hungry boys and girls venture beyond the boundaries of their township to systematically plunder the guava trees of mansions in a contiguous neighbourhood. Naming the rich neighbourhood 'Budapest' is not a blatant irony, as it would have been to call it, say, 'Rodeo Drive' or 'Biarritz'. This subtlety contrasts with the in-your-face irony of calling the children's home-township 'Paradise'. The author's striking pen name, 'No Violet Bulawayo,' is also complex. (Her real name is Elizabeth Zandile Tshele.) Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo is a hub of resistance to the geriatric dictator, Robert Mugabe, and 'Hitting Budapest' projects an image of its creator as no violet, let alone a shrinking one.<sup>5</sup>

The story's two main characters are sharply contrasted. 'Bastard' is a brutally practical orphan who enjoys undermining the other children's dreams. His opposite number, Darling, is a cherished ten-year old and a sensitive, curious, half-educated narrator. Between them, Bastard and Darling encapsulate a central conflict between fantasy and reality. Near the end of 'Hitting Budapest,' when Bastard explodes her dream of escaping to join her aunt in the US, Darling's reaction is fierce: 'If I had proper strength ... I would slap him, butt him on his big forehead, and then ... slam ... pound ... pin ... jab ... til he begged for his two-cents life' (15). This violent fantasy presages the oddly joyous brutality of the ending, when the children are about to steal the shoes of the corpse of a light-skinned woman with thin arms who has hanged herself in 'Heavenway Cemetery'.

First, though, Bastard stones the hanging woman to make sure she is dead. When another child, the hapless Godknows, protests that 'God will punish you for that', Bastard's blunt reply anticipates the final desecration: 'God does not live here, fool' (17). That pronouncement may sum up the theology of many Zimbabweans, forced as they are to bear the yoke of dictator Mugabe.

The hanging corpse may seem too important a figure to make her first appearance, as she does, so near the end of the story. She is, however, an echo of an earlier character. During the guava gleaning, through the locked gates of a big house, the children see a 'tall, thin woman' with 'feet peeking underneath her long skirt ... clean and pretty, like a baby's.' Munching on a piece of cake, the stranger stares out at them. The cake is unlike anything Darling has ever seen: 'The top is creamish and looks fluffy ... and there are coin-like things on it ... the color of burn wounds' (5-6).

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<sup>5</sup> 'Bulawayo', *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulawayo>

This naïve description heralds a conversation marked by mutual, culturally based misunderstandings. Godknows violates a taboo by asking the stranger, an adult, her age. 'Me? Well, I'm thirty-three, and I'm from London. This is my first time visiting my dad's country, she says, and twists the chain on her neck. The golden head on the chain is the map of Africa' (7).

Next, she asks, 'Do you guys mind if I take your picture? ... We don't answer because we're not used to adults asking us anything' (8). Assuming that silence means consent, she snaps photograph after photograph, until the children abruptly stalk off. Then, instigated by Bastard, they turn back and scream insults at her.

The unknown corpse in the cemetery feels like the ghost of this visitant from *ilu oyinbo dara* ('the white man's beautiful land'). The earlier description lingers, allowing readers to flesh out the suicide's description. The chain becomes the noose, and the unstated cause of the suicide, the map of Africa – that is, the collective misery of the lives of African children. Just as, having fled the first woman, they turned to shout insults at her, after fleeing the cemetery, they will return to desecrate the corpse.

The other lingering detail is the cake, transformed as the story ends, into the prosaic, but delightful, loaf of bread they plan to buy with money from selling the shoes – bread, a much more accessible dream than, say, escaping to the US: 'We all turn around and follow Bastard back into the bush, the dizzying smell of Lobels bread all around us now, and then we are rushing, then we are running, then we are running and laughing and laughing and laughing' (18).

The complex art of 'Hitting Budapest' invites us to be complicit in a joyous act of corpse looting. The story creates in its readers a deep uneasiness. Not to be flip, but it puts us in the children's shoes.

### Memory Recaptured.

Okwiri Oduor's 'My Father's Head' is another sophisticated story. The Kenyan author practises narrative sleights-of-hand to navigate time and space in ways that suit her subject, a young woman's quest to bring her father back from the dead. Also like 'Hitting Budapest,' 'My Father's Head' is anchored in the realities of contemporary Africa – in this case, the Luo district of western Kenya.

Take 'Simbi', the narrator-protagonist's name. Simbi-Nyaima is a crater lake in western Kenya about which there is a legend of a village that the gods sank, in punishment for the denizens' refusal of hospitality to an old woman.<sup>6</sup> Oduor's Simbi is a nurturing caretaker at an old people's home, but she is ambivalent about hosting her own dead father's ghost.

Simbi's memories are triggered by the arrival of another 'father,' Father Ignatius, the old people's new chaplain. She is critical of, and unwelcoming toward, this priest, who sermonises his new flock about love, then disappears from the story. Like Simbi, the old people are wary: 'although [they] gave Father Ignatius an ingratiating smile, what they really wanted to know was what type of place Kitgum was' (1).

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<sup>6</sup> 'The legendary tales of the great Simbi Nyaima Lake in Homabay County,' *Knowledge Bylanes, News from Kenya*: <http://www.knowledgebylanes.co.ke/the-legendary-tales-of-the-great-simbi-nyaima-lake-in-homabay-county/>

In fact, Kitgum, Father Ignatius' previous parish, was the site of a notorious massacre in north-central Uganda. The Acholi, the region's dominant ethnic group, are related to the Luo, and many are refugees from Uganda's civil wars, which the priest may also be.<sup>7</sup>

At first, Simbi wonders why she is having so much trouble remembering her father. Luckily, she finds help from a friend, Bwibo, the nurturing cook at the home. (In Swahili, 'Bwibo' has associations with harmony and family.) When Simbi, an amateur artist (like the author) tries to draw her father, but cannot remember the shape of his head, Bwibo explains why:

Although everyone has a head behind their face, some show theirs easily; they turn their back on you and their head is all you can see ... good men never show you their heads; they show you their faces. (4)

After Simbi becomes able to recall her father's violent death (run over by a cane tractor), and after she has talked to an old man at the home about how everyone wants to forget the elderly, Bwibo 'licked her index finger and held it solemnly in the air. "I swear, Bible red! I can help you and I can help you."' She completes the reclamation process through a vivid fantasy of Simbi's return to her intact childhood home: 'one day, you will renounce your exile, and you will go back home, and your mother will take out the finest china, and your father will slaughter a sprightly cockerel' (5).

The process of remembrance reaches fruition with a visit from the father's ghost. But, even then, Simbi is not sure she wants him to stay. As the story ends, the dignified ghost senses her lingering ambivalence:

My father said to me, 'I have seen you. You have offered me tea. I will go now.'  
I said, 'Maybe you could stay here for a couple of days, Baba [father].' (8)

Among the other earthy realities in which 'My Father's Head' is anchored are many descriptions of eating. (No surprise, since the story was first published in a South African anthology of food writing.) 'Do not buy chapati from Kadima's kiosk – Kadima's wife sits on the dough and charms it with her buttocks' (3). Oduor has mixed her ingredients ingeniously: the Simbi myth, the cook-as-magician, and the idea that one must concoct the precious past like a difficult recipe. As the 2014 Caine Prize spokesperson put it: 'Okwiri Oduor ... exercises an extraordinary amount of control and yet the story is subtle, tender and moving. It is a story you want to return to the minute you finish it.'<sup>8</sup>

## War and Politics.

Of the first eighteen Caine Prizes, Nigerians have won six, which is unsurprising, given that country's size, wealth, and status in the world of the arts. Writers such as Chinamanda Achiche and Teju Cole have international reputations, and 'Nollywood', still only 15 years old, is the world's second largest film industry. By the time he won the Prize for 'Bombay's Republic,'

<sup>7</sup> <https://ugandaradionetwork.com/story/kitgum-remembers-1986-nra-massacre>

<sup>8</sup> 'Okwiri Oduor wins 2014 Caine prize for African writing', *The Guardian*, 14 July 2014  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/14/okwiri-oduor-wins-2014-caine-prize-african-writing>

Rotimi Babatunde's resume included widely published fiction and poetry, plays produced in several countries, and residencies at arts colonies in the US and Italy.

'Bombay's Republic' presents a sweeping panorama of modern African history. Babatunde's narrative carries its protagonist from an unnamed country in sub-Saharan Africa to what was then Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and on to Burma (Myanmar), where he fights on World War Two's 'forgotten front'. After the war, Bombay returns home to further exploits. In a post-Prize interview, the author explained his choice of subject: 'that context of world war two in African history, and the story of the Nigerians who went to the Burmese front, has not been properly explored ... To understand the present we need to explore the past.'<sup>9</sup> But that explanation does not begin to capture the flavour of 'Bombay's Republic', a grisly, fantasy-laden satire whose targets include propaganda, war, politics, racism, and culture. Babatunde's garish language suggests that, as he wrote the story, he was sailing along on the heady palm wine of his own words.

Like many other young Africans, prompted by Allied propaganda, Bombay's motive for enlisting is fear of Nazi atrocities. After he is shipped out and trained, the story settles into a long horrors-of-war narrative, replete with graphic details. For instance, an expedition to rescue Bombay's commander ends with the discovery of his corpse:

The man was stripped stark naked and tied to a tree ... The spectacle of his entrails spilling out of his evacuated stomach and drooling down to his toes could not have been ghastlier. (18)

'Bombay's Republic' is also a coming-of-age story. In the course of the war, many of the protagonist's beliefs are turned topsy-turvy. When a maverick bombardier breaks out of the stockade, Bombay, on guard duty, shoots him dead. But the unthinkable act of killing a white man leads to a big surprise:

The next day, Bombay received a letter from his commanding officer. To Bombay's shock, it commended Bombay for his quick thinking, which had prevented a bigger carnage from decimating the barracks. (21)

When the war ends, the hero returns home just in time to play a singular role in the struggles for African independence, which were sparked, in part, by the wartime disillusionment of many soldiers like him. At first, though, he is just a village eccentric, who spins tall tales to delight the children. The children's favourite, about 'the clan of weeping jinni' that pursued Bombay through the jungle trying to steal his soul, provokes a different reaction from their elders: 'some grown-ups made mockery that ... it was not impossible that the veteran, as substitute to his three-medalled soul, had bartered off a slice of his sanity' (26).

At this point, Bombay re-boards the ship of history. When constables demand that he pay a hut tax on his imperial residence, the former jail, they are showered by streams of invective and urine from the palm-wine addled dictator. As the shrewd District Officer calculates, a non-

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<sup>9</sup> 'Rotimi Babatunde wins Caine prize for African writing,' *The Guardian*, 03 July 2012  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/03/rotimi-babatunde-wins-caine-prize>



response is indicated: ‘the native firebrands campaigning for independence could latch on to the matter as a fulcrum on which to hinge their campaign ... Better let sleeping dogs lie’ (31).

As this shaggy tale nears its end, Bombay’s self-proclaimed republic becomes a fun-house mirror of actual nightmare African nations. Consider the titles he confers upon himself:

Lord of All Flora and Fauna. Scourge of the British Empire ... Sole Discoverer of the Grand Unified Theorem ... Chief Commander of the Order of the Sahara Desert and the Atlantic Ocean. Father of the Internet. (32)

Compare that mouthful with, for example, the self-proclaimed title of Joseph Mobutu, the megalomaniacal kleptocrat who despoiled Zaire: ‘Mobutu Sese Seko Koko Ngbendu Wa Za Banga,’ which means, ‘the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake.’ *Selah!*

In a further *reductio*, Bombay batters on the failures and insecurities of the new Africa:

national leaders ... invited him to ... their countries. Bombay called these trips state visits. He always reminded his hosts that giving your guest something good to take away, if possible cash, was a venerable African tradition. (32)

And then comes the obligatory, fulsome obituary, of which Bombay is posthumously proud:

Before Hitler’s war spawned possibilities in his universe like body bags on the Burma front, Colour Sergeant Bombay would not have believed an obituary so affecting could come from a newspaper based in a country he considered foreign. (33)

The ‘foreign’ country, of course, was his own country of birth!

## Conclusion

The dystopian strain that runs through most of these eleven stories stands in a complex relation to reality. You may have come across a website called ‘Africa is a Country.’ That tendentious title flies in the face of 2006 Prize-winner Binyavanga Wainaina’s mockery of stereotypes, in ‘How to Write about Africa.’<sup>10</sup> But, as the world shrinks, the recent Caine Prize stories do seem, if not global, at least pan-continental. Why, for instance, do so many of them have open endings? Is it because the future of so much of Africa seems so uncertain? Not to mention the future of our shared planet, currently reeling from crisis to crisis.

Although urban grit remains a Caine Prize staple, it has become even grittier. Brian Chikwava’s manically playful ‘Seventh Street Alchemy’ (2004), for instance, has several grim counterparts among the new stories. Instead of jazz and flea markets, we now read about environmental disaster and the looting of corpses. My own 2010-2011 visits to more than a dozen African cities both confirmed the harsh visions of the recent Caine-Prize stories, and presented a sharp contrast with the vibrant, semi-functioning cities I had enjoyed during the 1960s. One of my favourites, back then, was Lagos, the setting for that ur-urban novel, Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (1954). During my recent visits, I was pickpocketed in Nairobi,

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<sup>10</sup> <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>

and menaced by thugs in Soweto (in Johannesburg) and thieves in Accra. I found myself, alas, thanking the gods of birth that I do not live in an African city.

One of the starkest failures of present-day Africa, with its explosive population growth, is the plight of the children. Education was to have been a pillar of the new African societies. But, even in the 1970s and 1980s, a striking image of this broken promise was the crowds of Zairean children lining the village streets in their ragged school uniforms, compelled to cheer the entourage of dictator Mobutu, even as he despoiled their schools.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the buffeting education has endured over the half-century of African Independence, it remains the hope of the continent's growing middle-class, and, ultimately, one basis for strengthening democracy. But not many of the poor young people who roil their way through the Caine-Prize stories are on the road from school to success. On the contrary, neither Bastard nor Darling seems to go to school, and Bombay does graduate work in the hard-knocks university of war.

During my African sojourns, I ran into many unmoored African children. In 2011, for example, at an outdoor cafe in Addis Ababa, my friends, visitors from the Ethiopian diaspora, and I were accosted by children steering blind beggars to people with money, thereby doubling the pull on our heartstrings. I also experienced, up close and personal, Africans of all ages who were deeply embittered by the disappointed hopes of Independence. I ran into quite a few Bastards.

On the other hand, it was my pleasure to meet the originals of the warm, clever narrators of 'Hitting Budapest' and 'My Father's Head.' Professionally, I interviewed and observed many resilient fighters for democracy, both in and out of government. On a personal level, time after time, I experienced the kindness of strangers. I think, for example, of an elderly guard at the un-air conditioned National Museum in Accra. Seeing that I was nearly overcome by the heat, he silently took my hand and guided me to a gate, which he unlocked, revealing a shaded sculpture garden. 'You can rest here, my friend,' he said.

Over time, what I expect to retain from the Caine-Prize stories are bittersweet snapshots, such as a deranged war veteran urinating on a tax collector, a young woman serving tea to her father's ghost, and joyful children gleaning the shoes of a hanging suicide. Like the fossil, AL288-1, aka Lucy, a replica of which I saw in Ethiopia's National Museum, Africa remains the mother of these characters – and of us all.

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<sup>11</sup> Howard W. French, *A Continent for the Taking: The Tragedy and Hope of Africa* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2004) 133.

## The Caine-Prize Winning Stories, 2007-2017

### Monica Arac de Nyeko, 'Jambula Tree' (2007), Uganda.

A lesbian coming-of-age story adumbrates the conflict between traditional and modern values. Originally published in Ama Ata Aidoo, ed. *African Love Stories* (Ayebia Clarke Publishing, Banbury, UK, 2006): <https://newint.org/books/fiction/jambula%20chapter%20one.pdf>

### Henrietta Rose-Innes, 'Poison' (2008), South Africa.

An industrial accident is the precipitating event for this description of South African society in microcosm. Originally published in *African Pens*, South African PEN (Cape Town, 2007): <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jul/09/caineprize>

### E.C. Osundu, 'Waiting' (2009), Nigeria.

Child refugees from war are marooned in a Red Cross camp in an unnamed African country. Originally published in *Guernica*, October 2008: <https://www.guernicamag.com/waiting/>

### Olufemi Terry, 'Stickfighting Days' (2010), Nigeria.

Adolescent boys who live in a garbage dump spend their days playing the eponymous war game. Originally published in *Chimurenga*, 2009: [https://newint.org/books/2010\\_terry\\_stickfighting\\_days.pdf](https://newint.org/books/2010_terry_stickfighting_days.pdf)

### No Violet Bulawayo, 'Hitting Budapest' (2011), Zimbabwe.

Originally published in *Boston Review*, 2010: <http://bostonreview.net/bulawayo-hitting-budapest>

### Rotimi Babatunde, 'Bombay's Republic' (2012), Nigeria.

Originally published in *Mirabilia Review*, 2011: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/565c3d39e4b027c789ba5b70/t/58191e1620099e33f3205f49/1478041113993/Bombay%27s+Republic+%28PDF%29.pdf>

### Tope Folarin, 'Miracle' (2013), USA/Nigeria.

A diasporan church in Texas is the setting for a meditation about the deeper meanings of faith. Originally published in *Transition*, 2012 (an excerpt from an autobiographical novel-in-progress, *The Proximity of Distance*): <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/490138/pdf>

### Okwiri Oduor, 'My Father's Head' (2014), Kenya.

Originally published in *Feast, Famine and Potluck: Short Story Day Africa* (South Africa, 2013): <http://mkenyaujerumani.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Okwiri-Oduor-My-Fathers-Head.pdf>

### Namwali Serpell, 'The Sack' (2015), Zambia.

This post-modern narrative charts the wanderings of a dying man's mind between past and present. Originally published in *Africa 39* (London, 2014): <https://lizzy-attree.squarespace.com/s/2015-The-Sack-Namwali-Serpell.pdf>



**Lidudumalingani, 'Memories We Lost' (2016), South Africa.**

A girl's efforts to save her schizophrenic sister are set against the backdrop of an isolated village. Originally published in *Incredible Journey: Stories That Move You* (Burnet Media, South Africa, 2015)

[https://static1.squarespace.com/.../Memories+We+Lost\\_Incredible+Journey\\_SINGLES](https://static1.squarespace.com/.../Memories+We+Lost_Incredible+Journey_SINGLES).

**Bushra Al-Fadil: 'The Story of the Girl Whose Birds Flew Away' (2017), Sudan.**

Translated from the Arabic (by Max Schmookler), and drawing upon Sudanese literature and culture, this rich, magical-realist story describes an encounter between an impoverished writer and a beautiful girl-spirit and her sister. Originally published in *The Book of Khartoum – A City in Short Fiction* (Comma Press, UK, 2016).

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/.../t/.../The+Story+of+the+Girl.....pdf>

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**Ron Singer's** writings about Africa have appeared, for instance, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, *Evergreen Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *open democracy*, *Poets & Writers*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He has published ten books, the four most recent of which are *Look to Mountains*, *Look to Sea* (poetry); *Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with Pro-Democracy Leaders* (non-fiction); *Betty & Estelle* and *A Voice for My Grandmother* (memoir); and *Geistmann in Africa* (thriller-travelogue). To find out more, visit [www.ronsinger.net](http://www.ronsinger.net).

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(Many other factual details are also taken from Wikipedia entries.)